

An Examination of the Relationship
Between Myths, Symbols, and the Unconscious

An Honors Thesis (HONORS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Linda VanScyoc", written over a horizontal line.

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People do not like to think. They do not like to work with the things which are difficult to grasp and that is perhaps the reason why we know so little about Heaven and Earth and the origin of men and animals. Perhaps, and perhaps not. It is very difficult to understand how we came into existence and where we go when we die. Darkness lies over the beginning and over the end. How could one know more about the most numinous which surrounds and which keeps us alive, about that which we call air and Heaven and sea, and what we call the human and all his dwelling places and the animals and the fishes and the seas and the lakes. Nobody can know anything for sure about the beginning of life.

But whoever opens his eyes and his ears and tries to remember what the old people said, MIGHT fill the emptiness of his thought by this or that knowledge.

(Von Franz, Patterns 21)

Myths arise from the inability to answer questions concerning the origin and substance of our cosmos. They are perhaps the most important and most sensitive myths. Due to the emotion surrounding the basic curiosity which encompasses the existence of the universe, myths are fragile. Since the origin of nature and human existence has been a complete mystery to early humans, this emotion along with the

unconscious has produced many models of creation myths. "The collective unconscious" is that part of the psyche which retains and transmits the common psychological inheritance of mankind (Jung, Man 105). The collective unconscious connects the original pattern of all things through symbolism. It relates to archetypal figures by utilizing the four psychological functions which Jung maintains exist in every human personality: thinking, feeling, sensation, intuition. This suggests that the collective unconscious serves as a channel for creative activity. Thus, analogies between ancient myths and the stories that appear in dreams are neither trivial nor accidental. The contents of the collective unconscious are invariably archetypes, or "elementary behavior patterns," that have been present from the beginning of time (Jung, Psyche 6). However, it is vital to make a clear distinction between archetypes and archetypal images. The archetypes are very likely to be innate structural predispositions which appear in actual experience as the element which orders or arranges representations into certain patterns (Von Franz, His Myth 125). In the realm of the conscious-unconscious, archetypes appear as archetypal images in the form of mythological, symbolic representations which are common to certain collectivities in their myths.

On one hand, mythology is a combination of discursive statements and of matter-of-fact narratives. Structural analysis, that is analysis which focuses on the recurring patterns of thought and behavior, has determined that it is

represented as a dissertation concerning myths in general, their origin, their nature, and their essence (Detienne, 1). On the other hand, myths conflict with knowledge if they are taken literally. Therefore, they should be viewed symbolically in order to prevent one's consciousness from overshadowing the nature of the myth. Symbolism attempts to satisfy the human unconscious through imagery. Myths instill virtues of faithfulness, devotion and loyalty which serve as protection from moral disruption (Jung, Psyche 11). They teach lessons concerning these virtues, and at the same time they afford an unconscious satisfaction of a mythological nature. It is this level of the myth that best illustrates the nature of the collective unconscious. By creating common, central themes, mythology is the vehicle through which societies establish links with the outer environment.

These central themes frequently surface in all myths. These motifs are found whenever the unconscious is preparing a basically important process in consciousness (Von Franz, Patterns B). Correlations between ancient myths and modern symbolism occur because the conscious mind of modern man preserves the symbol-making capacity that once found expression in the beliefs and rituals of the primitive (Jung, Man 105). Since these symbols are produced by the unconscious, man is able to interpret them from a historical and psychological perspective. This insight allows access to the unconscious and involuntarily exercises an influence on the environment (Jung, The Undiscovered Self 109). One such

motif is the idea of dual creators. One of the two original beings is the protagonistic, active creator. The other is an accompanying shadow figure who is a passive and necessary counterpart. An example of the concept of dual creators is revealed in one Eskimo myth which depicts Father Raven coming out of an unconscious state and awakening to a realization of reality (Von Franz, Patterns 24). Father Raven at once gropes in the dark and all his deeds are completely casual until it becomes manifest to him who he is and what he should do (Von Franz, Patterns 21). He continually sits in meditation and wonders what all could be in the darkness that surrounds him. One day, he notices a whirling in the air and a very small, light creature alights upon him. It was a little sparrow which Father Raven realizes has been there before him. This is projected onto Father Raven who slowly becomes conscious. In his light of conscious reality, he simultaneously comes into existence. Father Raven creates the world by discovering it, by becoming conscious of it, and partly by accidental actions. There is first a completely unconscious being of human form. The initial step is the awakening to an awareness of the outside world. Father Raven wants to know what is below in the abyss and he asks the little sparrow to go down to investigate (Von Franz, Patterns 24). Father Raven represents the actual creator, and his counterpart, the little sparrow, governs the abyss. The Raven's creation begins in the shape of man. The other forms follow. The little sparrow represents the unconscious which

seeks to answer the questions posed by man. This archetype reveals a tendency of man's inevitable evolution into ordered consciousness. Like many primitive myths, both sides have active and passive aspects. The nature of our experience with reality leads us to think in terms of opposites. These primitive myths are the ancestors of all things and through their interactions all things are understood. They become manifest in dreams via creative response.

These motifs are magnified dreams, and dreams are manifestations of the unconscious in image form which are in conflict with each other. That is what myth is. Myth is a manifestation of the unconscious in symbolic images which serves as a bridge between societies. All over the world there is a tendency to ascribe the act of creation to one figure who then retires and stays outside while another figure steps into the act of creation. As stated earlier, Father Raven exemplifies this role as he eventually separates himself from the little sparrow. The older figure does not proceed toward creation, but passively stays in the background and sometimes retires to the sky. It becomes an archetypal motif which describes the separation of individual consciousness from its unconscious background (Von Franz, Patterns 70). This figure of consciousness carries the accent of being creative since it portrays an understanding of the environment. The other is viewed as destructive due to its peculiarities of defining the environment by moving into unconsciousness. Creation is a continuing battle

between active and passive forces as witnessed in the original pattern between Father Raven and the little sparrow. Other myths conceive of the operation of two opposing creative and destructive forces, or the fundamental dualism of active and passive (Brandon, 196). As witnessed in the Eskimo myth, this concept personifies the phenomena of power manifest in the universe. The manifestations of that power are evaluated by men as creative and destructive. Such symbolic images are exhibited by the myth.

This progression of symbolic ideas may take place within the unconscious mind of modern man just as it did in the rituals of ancient societies. The history of symbolism and the role it has played in many different cultures reveals its re-creative meaning. Even today, models similar to the previous Eskimo myth provide groundwork for creation. Knowledge forces one to examine reason. Ironically, this conscious use of symbols is often produced unconsciously and spontaneously. It is for this reason, perhaps, that modern man cannot accept social creation as evident through symbols. Whereas primitive humans accept symbols as a natural part of everyday life, modern society continually attempts to render them meaningless and irrelevant through conscious activity (Jung, Man 104). This denial, in effect, evokes a universal response which enhances the powerful and redeeming effect of symbolism. Myths are the clues necessary to expose the unconscious and link it with consciousness (Campbell, 5). Yet in spite of certain similarities of theme, they differ

widely in the choice and treatment of individual motifs. The clues become a continuous motion circulating through the conscious and unconscious states.

Thus it can be observed that as soon as psychic phenomena touches one extreme, the phenomena begins to manifest its opposite quality in some hidden way. For example, when placed in the center of earth-Gods, it is common for sky-Gods to have an earthly component. Such is the case with the Pima Indians. Earth Doctor comes from a cloud and creates the world out of his body parts and from the very beginning has a rival called Elder Brother who always tries to undo and destroy what has been created by Earth Doctor (Von Franz, Patterns 65). This theme is central to the Eskimo myth in the sense that Father Raven serves as the primary creator although the little sparrow exists before his creations and destroys Father Raven's concept of consciousness. This myth is also similar to that which is held by the Iroquois. Maple Sprout creates the human being and all good things. He also teaches man cultural participation. His destructive twin, Tawiskaron, tries to imitate Maple Sprout, but can only create horrible animals and human beings which are demonic (Von Franz, Patterns 62).

As evidenced in the preceding passages, creation is an awakening towards consciousness and is identical with the creation of the world. Creation is a sudden autonomous event which, from a psychological angle, takes place in the collective unconscious (Von Franz, Patterns 36). Archetypes

represent an instinctive trend introduced from our consciousness (Jung, Man 69). They, too, are autonomous factors which can be observed in the creative activity of all civilizations in the form of fairy tales, legends, rituals, and myths (Jung, Psyche xxi). Archetypes are observed through such autonomous factors. The archetype is a tendency to form such representation of a motif and it is highly possible to have great variations in details without losing the archetype's basic patterns (Jung, Man 67). The archetypes of human experience are derived from man's deepest unconscious mind and reveal themselves in universal symbols. Duality is a basic law of all psychological manifestations and can be found all over the world. The first duality is served by the second duality. This is evident as Father Raven's quest for knowledge is satisfied by the little sparrow's inquiry into the abyss. There is always an active and passive aspect of the dual tendency of the unconscious. The unconscious is the mechanism through which curiosity is dispelled.

Since the unconscious is a creative response system to the field of consciousness, it can suddenly produce a new impulse. In accordance to this, the human psyche in Greek philosophy, Gnosticism and medieval tradition has attributed a middle ground between opposites, between spirit and body, and between heaven and earth (Von Franz, Patterns 41). The darkness represents this middle ground between Father Raven and the little sparrow. Jung has used this scheme to

illustrate the role of consciousness and the role of the psyche. The illustration is dreams. Dreams come from the psyche (Campbell, 40). A plane of consciousness is formed and can be attained in the dream state, and from this plateau one can identify oneself with that which transcends pairs of opposites (Campbell, 48). In his book, The Power of Myth, Campbell determines that myths are the world's dreams (Campbell, 15). They are archetypal dreams which deal with great human problems and existence. Jung believes that myth is grounded in the unconscious (Campbell, 58). Unable to explain this unconscious existence, people have projected mythological symbols to fill in the gaps of the unknown. Jung's definition of projection "...means the expulsion of subjective content into an object" (Von Franz, Patterns 6). This can be achieved through mythological imagery. For example, Jung believes that the circle, in reference to projection, is one of the most powerful religious symbols (Campbell, 214). The ultimate goal is to coordinate the personal circle with the universal circle. In considering the symbol of the circle, it is one of the great primordial images of mankind as man continually travels the circuit between his conscious and unconscious awakenings. The Eskimo myth also illustrates this concept. As realization of reality is experienced by Father Raven, he slowly becomes conscious. The sparrow plays a crucial role in this process as it provides evidence supporting the existence of the unconscious. This serves as a cornerstone to Father Raven.

In his light of consciousness, reality simultaneously comes into existence. His being has completed a specific cycle which, in essence, serves as his world.

According to Campbell, the whole world is a circle and all circular images reflect the psyche. Therefore, there may be some relationship between these designs and the conscious and unconscious activities of the psyche (Campbell, 214). Campbell also believes that all individuals work out a mandala and try to find a center within the circle of different impulse systems and value systems of each life (Campbell, 217). The center represents the unconscious. Fear of the unconscious psyche impedes self-knowledge to a wider understanding and knowledge of psychology. A question now arises. Does the increase in self-knowledge resulting from the withdrawal of impersonal projections, the integration of the contents of the collective unconscious, exert a specific influence on the ego personality (Jung, Psyche 22)? The answer is yes. It exerts considerable influence. As Father Raven begins to understand the darkness, he associates new discoveries with his basic frame of reference and symbolic imagery. The ego forms the center of the field of consciousness and is that complex factor to which all conscious contents are related (Jung, Psyche 2). Despite the unlimited extent of its bases, it is never more and never less than consciousness as a whole. It finds a limit when it comes up against the unknown. The whole living world is informed by consciousness (Campbell, 11). The

relationship between myths, symbolism, and the unconscious provides testimony to this. Utilization of symbolism enables the unconscious to produce creation myths. Once this cycle has been completed, consciousness reflects the psyche.

Myths bring us to a level of consciousness which is spiritual. Creation myths represent unconscious and pre-conscious processes which "describe not the origin of our cosmos, but the origin of man's conscious awareness of the world" (Von Franz, Patterns 8). The meditation which Father Raven practices actually lifts him to a level of unconsciousness which enables him to focus on his conscious awareness of his surroundings. These pre-conscious processes can be observed in dreams and unconscious materials. These unconscious materials are assimilated to the ego. Therefore, the more numerous and the more significant the unconscious contents are, the more closely approximated the ego is to the self. We are able to transform our consciousness according to what we are disposed to think. We must view the object as energy, not as a material object (Campbell, 147). The inspiration to do this comes from the unconscious mind. It is here that questions are answered. It is here that the unconscious manifests itself in the conscious. Thus a secret connection between archetypes and instinct is uncovered. Perhaps having a sixth sense of this, man continually uses consciousness and knowledge to link archetypes and instinct. Upon further elaboration of the Eskimo myth, this pattern becomes evident. While exploring the darkness, Father Raven

learns that everything around him is dead clay (Von Franz, Patterns 22). He also begins to touch himself. After meditating, he suddenly understands that he is a free being and not connected with all his surroundings. He begins to creep slowly over the clay in order to find out where he is. Suddenly, his hands meet an empty space ahead of him and he knows he should not go further. His instinct informs him that he cannot go any further. Father Raven is consciously aware of his environment. Although in fact independent of his environment, he is inevitably bound to his surroundings. Thus it becomes obvious that man has archetypal instincts (Campbell, 147). It is they which reflect consciousness and bind him to his environment.

Conscious activity is rooted in this instinct and thus derives its dynamism and ideational forms (Jung, The Undiscovered Self 70). The more civilized and complicated a man is, the less he is able to follow his instincts (Jung, Psyche 20). The activation of unconscious fantasies is a process that occurs when consciousness discovers itself in a critical situation. Myths are the result. They are developed when an individual cannot overcome such a situation by conscious means. Father Raven does not have the capabilities to journey into the abyss of which he is extremely curious. Since the abyss is a crucial segment of his environment, he discovers a little sparrow which has the qualifications necessary to gather information about its contents. The little sparrow is created for this task. Man

slips into a purely conceptual world where the products of his conscious activity progressively replace reality (Jung, The Undiscovered Self 81). In reality, man is the victim of the technology which has conquered space and time. His existence is threatened by his own safeguard. Campbell does not believe there is a conflict between science and mythology. He states, "Science is breaking through now into the mystery dimensions. It's pushed itself into the sphere the myth is talking about. It's come to the edge...the interface between what can be known and what is never to be discovered. It is a mystery that transcends all human research" (Campbell, 132). This is perhaps the best explanation of creation myth similarities, which is mainly due to the fact that there are innumerable occurrences beyond the range of human understanding. However, we constantly use symbolic terms to represent these concepts which cannot be fully defined or comprehended (Jung, Man 2). This is one reason why all religions employ symbolic languages and images. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary's definition of abyss, "an immeasurable depth," effectively visualizes the inability of the Father Raven to fully comprehend such vastness. No matter what instruments are used, there is a limit that man reaches which cannot be surpassed by conscious knowledge. The circle is continuous. Father Raven cannot experience the abyss for himself, and neither can man. Just as Father Raven utilizes the little sparrow to meet his curiosity, man, in turn, utilizes his unconscious creativity.

Myth, the unconscious process of symbolism, will continue to be the root of all creation in the future (Jung, The Undiscovered Self 110). In his book, Man and His Symbols, Jung views the unconscious as the great guide and advisor of the conscious. It is also possible to view Father Raven and the little sparrow as the conscious and unconscious, respectively. The sparrow serves as the guide for Father Raven. It is the little sparrow that answers questions for which Father Raven has no frame of reference. It is the little sparrow that provides concreteness to the intangible element of Father Raven's environment. The unconscious serves the conscious. As a whole, societies may fail to see the connection between ancient myths and folk stories and their attitude toward dramatic events of today. Man may deny the conscious of acknowledging these similarities, but he cannot deny the unconscious creation of them. According to Marie-Louise Von Franz,

It is certainly not a knowledge that could be connected with the ego, and hence not a conscious knowledge as we know it, but rather a self-subsistent "unconscious" knowledge.... It is...a "perceiving" which consists...of images.... These...images are... formal factors in spontaneous [archetypal] products ...[and contain] "the images of all creation"....
(Patterns 213)

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